



Rosalyn Blake Bell

(1923 -)

First woman to serve on the Montgomery County District Court. Second woman to be appointed to the Maryland Court of Special Appeals

Rosalyn Blake Bell was born in Trenton, New Jersey, in 1923. After her parents' divorce, she spent most of her childhood with her mother, who owned her own business, a flower shop. She attended Simmons College in Boston where she earned a B.A. in 1944. One of her employers, a lawyer, encouraged her to earn a law degree. In 1947, with her husband, she enrolled in law school at National University (now merged with George Washington University) in Washington, D.C. Her son was born the following year. She continued her education at night, and graduated with honors in 1951, the same year she was admitted to the bar. During the next ten years, Bell devoted her time to her family. She returned to the full-time practice of law in the early 1960s, joining a private practice with her husband. Her son would later join his parents in their firm Bell, Bell, and Bell.

During her years in private practice, Bell assumed leadership roles within the legal community. She was trustee (1973-1978) and later director (1973-1977) of the Montgomery-Prince George's Continuing Legal Education Institute. She also served as vice-president (1976-1978) and trustee (1978-1980) of the Maryland Institute for the Continuing Professional Education of Lawyers. Both of these organizations focus on the formation of education programs designed to update lawyers on the latest legal developments and opinions. The District of Columbia Women's Bar Association recognized Bell as the Woman Lawyer of the Year in 1975. In 1976, and again in 1989, Bell served as governor of the Maryland State Bar Association. She was president of the Maryland Women's Bar Association from 1983 to 1985.

Bell's legal career was recognized in 1978 when she was appointed to the District Court of Maryland for District 6, Montgomery County, at a time when there were only seven women judges in the state. She was the first woman to serve on the District Court in Montgomery County. Two years later, in 1980, she was elevated to Associate Judge for Montgomery County Circuit Court, Sixth Judicial Circuit. In 1983, Governor Harry Hughes appointed Bell to the Court of Special Appeals as member at-large.

Throughout her career on the bench, Bell has been recognized as an authority in family law. Through her writings and decisions, Bell shaped the way alimony payments were determined by the courts. She has championed economic parity for divorced women and their children. She has authored "Alimony and the Financially Dependent Spouse in Montgomery County," "Maryland Civil Jury Instructions and Commentary," and "Trial of a Domestic Case." She also was a member of the Governor's Task Force on Family Law, established in 1991. The task force was charged with examining the system of family law in Maryland in light of the magnitude of social and economic consequences of divorce, and addressing the inequities that result. As recognition to her many achievements in family law, the Women's Law Center of Maryland established the Rosalyn B. Bell Award in 1992. The award is given annually for accomplishments in family law.

Throughout her career, Bell has been an active women's rights advocate. In 1980, her initiative resulted in the establishment of the Montgomery County Spouse Abuse Task Force. She has led the task force since its creation. The task force has brought many improvements in the legal system's response to victims of domestic violence and enhanced coordination among service and law enforcement agencies through its public education efforts and legislative activities.

Bell has also advocated for women in the court system. In 1987, she was a founding member of the Maryland Special Joint Committee on Gender Bias in the Courts. The goal of the committee was to investigate sexual discrimination in the Maryland judicial system. The committee issued a report entitled "Gender Bias in the Courts" that concluded that gender bias existed in the system. In response to the report, a second committee, "The Select Joint Committee on Gender Neutrality," was established to take action against bias and sexual discrimination. The pioneering work of Judge Bell, and of both committees, helped to promote women as legal professionals, changed the sexist attitudes and behaviors of court room personnel, and sought to eliminate sexual bias in legal opinions. During her career, Judge Bell has worked to bring more women into the judiciary.

Bell has also taught at several universities. In the latter stage of her career, she has concentrated on the legal and ethical issues surrounding genetic testing and research. She has served on the board of directors and as chair of special projects at the Einstein Institute for Science, Health, and the Courts, an organization devoted to educating lawyers and judges on the application of the genetic sciences to the legal profession.

Judge Bell retired in 1993. That same year, she was inducted into the Maryland Women's Hall of Fame. The purpose of the Hall of Fame is to honor Maryland women who have made unique and lasting contributions to the economic, political, cultural, and social life of the State, and to provide visible models of achievement for future women leaders.

SOURCES:

- The Montgomery County Historical Society Library
- www.mdarchives.state.md.us
- www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/educ/exhibits/womenshall/html/whflist.html